

# A Study of Errors in the Paragraph Writing of EFL Learners: A Case Study of First Year Translation Students at University of Applied Science and Technology in Bushehr, Iran

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**Abstract**—The present study attempts to reveal the total number of errors in paragraph writing in First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. A total of 70 students at First Year Translation in Bushehr, Iran as foreign language learners take part in this investigation. The outcomes of the study show that sum number of errors in paragraph writing were 165. The outcomes show that there was no significant different in number of errors between topic sentence and supporting sentences. Also there was no significant difference between topic sentence and concluding sentence in paragraph writing. But there was a significant different in number of errors between supporting sentences and concluding sentence in First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. It was observed that the category that included the largest number of errors were the errors in supporting sentence.

**Index Terms**—error, error analysis, paragraph writing, writing difficulties

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present study attempts to examine errors in the paragraph writing of EFL learners in topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences of Iranian learners of English committed by First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. In the field of foreign language learning, researchers have been interested in identifying errors, classifying them, and evaluating their seriousness. Error is committed by many second and foreign language students because they are not aware of the rules in second or foreign language. Also these errors show problematic areas which students can't learn perfectly.

Corder (1971) stated that “errors are the result of some failure of performance”. Norrish (1983) defined “an error as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently get(s) it wrong”. Lennon (1991) regarded an error as a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would not be produced by the speaker's native speaker counterparts (as cited in Liu and Wang, 2011). EFL learners committed many errors in listening, reading, speaking, and specially writing. Writing is an important and complicated skill. Writing is a productive skill that foreign and second language students need to learn in order to increase their ability in understanding the linguistic knowledge and their communication skill with other people. Writing is a bridge between a reader and a writer and if a writer is able to express his /her idea clearly and exactly, it can then be a useful communication for giving information to the readers. Therefore, the writer has to state material so that the reader can understand it without confusion and ambiguity.

Chidambaram (2005) argued that writing is a conscious, deliberate and planned activity.

Like other skills of language, writing purposes vary for teachers. Some teachers emphasize on forms of language, some functions of language, and others forms and communication. On the linguistic level the purpose of writing is using grammatical forms accurately. On the communication level, the aim of writing is to express an idea in order for the reader to be able to clearly understand the intention of writer. Therefore, by practicing writing, students are able to understand forms and functions of the grammatical goals. There are many reasons for errors in paragraph writing the main reason of which is that learners are acquainted with the rules or grammars of writing, so they can't transfer what they mean to the reader and support their main idea. Rajatanun (1988) said that “a paragraph is a unit of writing which expresses one central idea and consists of two kinds of sentences: a topic sentence and supporting sentences.” Jayakaran (2005) argued that “the basic unit of any writing, be it a composition, an essay, an article of general nature, a short story or a humor piece, is the paragraph”. A paragraph contains some sentences that expand a main basic idea. This basic idea is often expressed in the first part of the sentence and this first sentence of a paragraph is usually called the topic sentence. A paragraph is different in length. Some of them are short and others are long.

O'Donnell and Paiva (1993) provided more details about the essential parts for paragraph writing which include a topic sentence, supporting sentences, details, logical order, logical connectors, a concluding sentence, unity and that parallel progression that is most frequently used in the coherence. Owl (2009) clarified a paragraph as a group of

closely-related sentences which deal with and develop one idea. According to him, it is like a family in which all members are related; likewise, all sentences in the paragraph are related. Almost every piece of writing that is longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. A paragraph consists of the topic sentence, supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. These parts must be unified and coherent.

According to Wyrick (1999) in writing, it means that one thought flows smoothly into the next. In general, a writing error refers to the errors at the competence level of language students because it occurs regularly in their writing. Many students in universities of Iran have problems in paragraph writing, so the main purpose of this research is to find the common types of errors in paragraph writing made by Iranian students at University of Applied Science and Technology in Bushehr. Also, this research attempts to understand the main reason of problems in paragraph writing of EFL students to suggest solutions and to improve their paragraph writing tasks.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars, who studied the errors in paragraph writing committed by groups of foreign and second language learners learning English as second and foreign language, have reported interesting findings.

Zhang et al (1995) compared the writing performance of 138 non-English majors and 62 English majors of a Chinese university via a multiple choice test and an essay writing test. The results showed that the non-English majors did much better in the multiple choice task than in the writing task while the English majors did better the other way around, and that the non-English majors made far more errors in the writing task than the English majors did. In addition, they found that, for both English majors and non-English majors, rhetorical problems in their writing were much worse than grammatical problems (as cited in Liu and Wang, 2011). Connell (2000) analyzed different kinds of errors that Japanese students made on tests which required full, written sentences to get the results for constructing a suitable syllabus. Each error was analyzed on how it affected the understanding of the sentence in which it was used. The results showed that the use of subject in a sentence, the parts of speech and general word order created more problems than other grammatical aspects (p. 95-103). Olsen (1999) carried out research in English written by Norwegian EFL learners. Language problems on different linguistic levels were analyzed and the theory of compensatory strategies was used (as cited in Olsen). The results showed that less proficient learners had a higher number of grammatical, orthographic and syntactic errors, which can be attributed to cross-linguistic influence. Thananart (2000) examined errors in comparison and contrast paragraphs written by EFL university students at Chulalongkorn University. The vast majority of errors were grammatical structure (73.86%), and the other types of errors were errors in using transition signals (10.01%), verb forms (7.68%), word choice (6.90%) and spelling (1.55%). Khansir and Shahhoseiny (2013) analyzed the written errors such as articles, tense, active and passive voice of Iranians at pre-university level. The results of the study indicated that the total number of errors committed by pre-university level were 1755. It was observed that the pre-university students produced 669 in articles which came to 38.2%. In fact the largest number of errors was the errors of articles. The total number of errors found in active and passive voice was 506 which came to 28.8%. The number of errors made by Iranian at pre-university level in the use of tense was 580. They constituted 33% of errors for tenses.

Khansir (2013) analyzed the written errors such as punctuations, articles, spellings and conjunctions in the writing of Iranian and Indian students (as cited in Khansir 2013). The results of the study indicated that the total number of errors committed by the Iranian students was 3045 and that of their Indian 'peers' was 3274. The maximum errors made by the subjects were from the realm of 'punctuation' (1387). The number of errors made by the Indian students in the use of punctuation was 718 which came to 22% for errors in punctuation. The Iranian students committed 669 errors. They constituted 22% of errors for punctuation. Thus, the minimum number of errors recorded in writing in this study was 'spelling.' The total number of errors in the use of spelling was 1050. The number of errors committed by the Iranian students in the use of spelling was 578 which come to 19% for errors in spelling. The number of errors committed by the Indian students was 472. They constituted 14% of errors for spelling. Cheng (1994) examined 455 errors in the English compositions produced by six first-year English majors and three second-year English majors from a Chinese university in Beijing. The researcher groups the errors into four categories (morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic errors) with several subcategories in each type and concluded that syntactic errors were the most serious, followed by semantic errors and morphological errors. Nevertheless, the researcher did not provide any scheme of classifying the errors or explain what constituted each type of the errors (as cited in Liu and Wang 2011).

Nowadays English is a special place in the university curriculum in many countries, because English is an international language. English is used as second or foreign language by a great number of people in many countries even though their native language is different. Also, English is the language of communication in the world. Many EFL learners have problems in different aspects of English language especially in paragraph writing. In Iran, many instructors in universities face a large number of errors in learning English especially in paragraph writing. Sometimes in paragraph writing student 'sentences do not have a topic sentence, occasionally their sentences are long or short, and once in a while their sentences lead to no conclusion. Therefore, in order to assist the learner to improve their paragraph writing, in this study the researcher needs to recognize most common types of learners' errors in paragraph writing and compare errors in topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence with each other. Using this method, the researcher can understand which part of writing is more problematic for First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology.

**Research Questions.** The following research questions are of particular interest:

1. Is there a significant difference in number of errors between the topic sentence and supporting sentences in paragraph writing made by Bushehr EFL students?
2. Is there a significant difference in number of errors between supporting sentences and concluding sentence in paragraph writing made by Bushehr EFL students?
3. Is there a significant difference in number of errors between the topic sentence and concluding sentences in paragraph writing committed by Bushehr EFL students?

**Hypotheses of the Study.** The hypotheses of this study are:

1. There isn't a significant difference in the number of errors between the topic sentence and supporting sentences in paragraph writing made by Bushehr EFL students.
2. There isn't a significant difference in the number of errors between supporting sentences and concluding sentence in paragraph writing made by Bushehr EFL students.
3. There isn't a significant difference in number of errors between the topic sentence and concluding sentences in paragraph writing made by Bushehr EFL students.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study concentrates on the errors in paragraph writing that are committed by First Year Translation Students of Applied Science and Technology in Bushehr. The methodology in this study consists of two stages: At the first stage data are collected and then analyzed. In this study the data are collected in order to a) compare errors in paragraph writing; b) determine the number of errors in paragraph writing; c) to understand main reason of writing errors. In fact in this study the researcher investigates the types of errors in students of Applied Science and Technology in Bushehr and then she compares errors in the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence of their paragraph writing. The data is analyzed through the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software in this research.

**Participants.** The participants for this study consisted of 70 First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. These learners were in their second semester and were learning English as a foreign language. Of the 70 students, 40 were male and 30 were female. Their age range was 19 to 28. Table 1 shows frequency age of these students.

TABLE 1:  
AGE AND FREQUENCY OF THE SUBJECTS

Age	Frequency
19-22	32
21-28	38

**Instruments.** Like Khansir and Shhoseiny (2013) the instruments utilized in this study were a) A General English Proficiency Test for determining the proficiency level in English of the participants; b) A background questionnaire to extract information on subjects' age, gender and level of education and the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence in paragraph writing were developed by the investigator. According to Khansir (2013) the General English Proficiency Test (Transparent) in this study consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The test was selected in order to estimate the level of English proficiency in students. In this study the background questionnaire consisted of 10 questions about address, age, family, language, etc. The topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences in paragraph writing is used for collecting data in this research. Using different parts of paragraph was designed in order to measure the ability of students in paragraph writing and get knowledge about most problematic areas of writing in First Year Translation Students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. In this study, the paragraph writing is used for recognizing the number of errors in different parts of a paragraph.

**Procedure.** Before concentrating on paragraph writing which has a basic function in this study, in order to collect the data, the researcher gives some proficiency test to the students. The proficiency test was administered to the Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. Therefore, the researcher gives some proficiency test to the students in order to understand the proficiency level of students. The General Proficiency Test was appropriate for Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. The reliability of this test through K-R21 was .68 for these participants. The paragraph writing was the fundamental purpose in this study, therefore the researcher developed A paragraph writing test. In addition, the present researcher visited Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. The researcher gave a simple and an interesting topic to students and asked them to write three short paragraphs which consisted of a topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. Also the researcher said that their time was limited. The time for paragraph writing was 60 minutes. After a few days the researcher again gave the students topic sentence to the students and asked them to write a paragraph. Again, the topic was interesting and easy to write. Also, in this stage the researcher determined the time. The researcher gave different subjects to the students for paragraph writing. In fact she examined paragraph writing several times in First Year Translation Students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology in order to understand in which parts of paragraph writing (the topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence) students needed more practice. Then the researcher classified, explained,

compared error and suggested remedial measures to overcome these errors. In the first process, the researcher classifies errors in paragraph writing made by the students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. In the second process, the researcher compares the type of errors in the topic sentence with supporting sentences. In the third process, the researcher compares errors in supporting sentences with concluding the sentence and in the fourth stage she compares errors in the topic sentence with errors in concluding sentence in paragraph writing in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology. Finally, the researcher explains the cause of errors in paragraph writing. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is recognizing the common types of errors in paragraph writing in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology and then helping students to improve their writing by avoiding these current errors.

#### IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

To assess the different degrees of errors in different parts of paragraph writing, one way ANOVA was applied. The results of the study revealed that the total number of errors in paragraph writing in First Year Translation students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology was 165. The number of errors in the topic sentence was 85 which came to 81.6% errors in this area. The number of errors in supporting sentences was 69 which came to 97.2%. Also the number of errors in concluding sentence was 38 which included 53.5% of students' error. Therefore, the number of students' errors in supporting sentences was higher than the errors in the topic and concluding sentence. The below table shows these errors clearly.

TABLE2:  
NUMBERS OF ERRORS IN TOPIC SENTENCE, SUPPORTING SENTENCES, CONCLUDING SENTENCE

Test item	Errors	Percentage
Topic sentence	58	%81.6
Supporting sentences	69	%97.2
Concluding sentence	38	%53.5
Total	165	%23.37

In order to answer the questions of this study, the researcher compares the number of errors in the topic sentence and supporting sentences. The results revealed that there is no significant difference between the topic sentence and supporting sentences in paragraph writing.

TABLE3:  
TOPIC SENTENCE AND SUPPORTING SENTENCES

Test item	Mean	N	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Topic sentence	1.4571	70	.8458	.00	4.00
Supporting sentences	2.5072	70	.93342	1.00	6.00

Table (3) indicated that standard deviation (topic sentence = .84589 and supporting sentence = .93342) and mean scores (topic sentence = 1.4571 and supporting sentences = 2.5072) of the two variable are not very different. Thus, there is no significant difference in the number of errors between the topic sentence and supporting sentences. Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported. The students committed more errors in supporting sentences than the topic sentence in paragraph writing. The minimum number of errors in the topic sentence is .00 and the maximum number of errors is 4. The minimum number of errors in supporting sentences is 1 and the maximum is 6 in paragraph writing.

TABLE 4:  
CONCLUDING SENTENCE AND SUPPORTING SENTENCES

Test item	Mean	N	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Concluding sentence	1.3143	70	.73313	1.00	4.00
Supporting sentences	2.5072	70	.93342	1.00	6.00

Table (4) indicated that standard deviation (concluding sentence = .73313 and supporting sentence = .93342) and mean scores (concluding sentence = 1.3143 and supporting sentence = 2.5072) of the errors in concluding sentence and supporting sentence were different. Thus, the number of errors in these variables are different. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the numbers of errors in supporting sentences and concluding sentence in paragraph writing of First Year Translation Students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and technology. Again the second hypothesis in this study is rejected.

TABLE5:  
TOPIC SENTENCE AND CONCLUDING SENTENCE

Test item	Mean	N	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Topic sentence	1.4571	70	.84589	.00	4.00
Concluding sentence	1.3143	70	.73313	1.00	4.00

Table (5) indicated that the standard deviation (Topic sentence = .84589 and concluding sentence = 73313) and mean scores (Topic sentence=1.4571 and concluding sentence =1.3143) of these two variables are different. The number of errors in concluding sentence is smaller than the number of errors in the topic sentence because the mean and standard deviation of errors in concluding sentence were smaller than the mean and standard deviation in the topic sentence. Thus, the results of this table and comparison between the number of errors in the topic sentence and concluding sentences show that the students committed more errors in the topic sentence than the concluding sentence. But the mean and standard deviation were not very different. Therefore, there is not a significant difference in the number of errors between the topic sentence and concluding sentence. Therefore, the third hypothesis is supported as well.

## V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the errors in paragraph writing of EFL learners and its contribution to English language teaching in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology in Iran. The results of this study show that Iranian foreign language learners have several problems in paragraph writing. It was found that they were not familiar with some rules in paragraph writing. English is not the second language in Iran but it is a foreign language. Students learn English in schools, institutes, and universities. Most of the time, they couldn't use this language in communication and environment. Therefore, they forget rules of English. Also, in some English classrooms, teachers emphasize grammar and they don't teach students a good way for writing. Many students are able to start paragraph writing but they can't continue the subject. Sometimes, their sentences were short and lack meaning. Therefore, it seems that students of First Year Translation in Bushehr University of Applied Science have some problems in supporting their writing. Thus, some students understand the grammar of language but are not able to apply these rules in paragraph writing.

Another source of errors in paragraph writing in this research could be lack of knowledge in grammar, vocabulary, interference of mother tongue, and lack of sufficient practice in writing. In addition, some methodologies in teaching English and learning strategies were responsible for students committing errors in paragraph writing of students in Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology in Iran. Thus, teachers should choose effective methodology for teaching writing, familiarize students with useful ways of learning English, insist on correct spelling, vocabulary and grammar, and should help students pay attention to punctuation and practicing more regarding writing of different parts of a paragraph. In conclusion, students should be able to write a good topic sentence, support it and reach a reasonable conclusion in paragraph writing. In addition, teachers should help students in paragraph writing by familiarizing students with English grammar, and using accurate ways of expressing ideas in writing and by helping their students apply the certain essential rules in the writing of sentences.

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